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ABSTRACT

The Native Studies curriculum has an important role to play in the development of meaningful community control for Native American education. Native Studies may legitimately take many forms and employ many methods: the essential element is that educators adopt a clear and consistent attitude toward Native Studies based on respect for Native people as the real experts on the objectives and goals of Native Studies. Educators need not fear that a Native controlled school would ignore the traditional curriculum--literature, science, and philosophy are not foreign to Native learning and Native parents are not oblivious to the educational demands of modern life. What would be innovative in Native controlled schools would be the recognition that the serious study of indigenous history and culture is as productive as the study of foreign societies. This assumption underlies the existence of Native American Studies on the college and university level, where the discipline encompasses an immensely complex historicial, linguistic, and cultural sphere that has been largely ignored by popular history. If the new discipline succeeds it may provide a scholarly base and meeting ground for Native people throughout the Americas and afford non-Native Americans the opportunity to learn of and from the first and oldest inhabitants of this land. (JH)

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NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

and

CURRICULUM

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Education is every culture's bridge from one generation to the next; if the concise and commonly held definition of culture as simply "learned behavior" is accepted, it is obvious that there can be nor has there ever been a culture devoid of an efficient educational system whose principle aim is societal continuation. It is equally apparent that never in cases of contact between two or more cultures has one culture brought the notion of education to another, though logically just as the cultures differ so do their respective goals, methodologies and orientations to education diverge.

It can further be stated that in the past two thousand years or so of the world's history there have been few truly isolated cultures. The necessities of trade, migration and population dispersal have permitted few communities to remain oblivious to the existence of a world beyond their own borders. Therefore the requirements of learning about "other people", "them," have been incorporated into every culture's educational system for a long while.

In most cases, where the two cultures have been in prosimity but not in either a situation of intense interaction or, particularly, in a dominant/subordinate relationship with each other, this learning has been untraumatic and basically productive. Each is free to select those elements of the other (religion, technology, etc.) which it feels are most productive and efficient and, importantly, to reject those elements which it feels are antagonistic to its own existence and well-being. Thusly have Eskimos interacted traditionally with Athapaskans,

French with English, Italians with Chinese, and so on. It must not be forgotten that for the greater part of man's history on earth, cultural pluralism has been the norm.

The purpose of inter-cultural education is and always has been understanding; but understanding is not always a neutral value. It can be used to suppress as well as to equate. It is perhaps a trusim to state that two cultures cannot be adequately or fairly compared when using the norms or standards of only one of them.

Every culture has a unique hierarchial set of values which do not necessarily parallel the values of another culture. Whereas one society with a primarily technological bias might equate "change" with good, another culture with differing needs might be most interested in preserving the status quo. Two such cultures do not allide easily.

The history of European-Native American culture contact has more often than not been the attempt of one culture (Euro-American) to impose its values, goals and standards upon a variety of ethnically differing societies (Native American). If the implicit goal of this system has been to make Native American culture homogeneous with Euro-American cultures, it has obviously not been achieved. After hundreds of years of imposed Euro-American structures, there remain many diverse and heterogeneous Native societies. This does not, of course, imply that these Native American groups have remained exactly as they were at the time of first "contact", but they do remain

substantially different from American or Western society as a whole. Furthermore, as societies which have been under consistant pressure to change, they are more aware than the dominant society of the real nature of these basic cultural dicotomies.

Non-Native educators, when dealing with Native populations have almost always operated under the false presumption that Native people do not know best what education they need. Historically, Native culture was often prejudged as bad or at least inadequate and consequently all elements of traditional Native curricula were either not included or removed from the Non-Native school. This procedure reached its logical conclusion in the Mission and BIA boarding schools, where for years students were punished severely if they dared to communicate among themselves in their own language. The attempt was made to isolate children from their parents and consequently from their heritage, though no meaningful models were presented as replacements.

In non-boarding schools this situation was not much improved. There was always a clear line of demarcation between the culture and body of knowledge of the home and that of the school. It is not surprising, therefore, that parents often regarded the school and its personnel as alienating forces and adopted attitudes of non-cooperation, non-involvement and even hostility towards them. It was patently obvious to these parents that the school regarded them as incapable of educating their own children; furthermore, the school curricula, in totally excluding all elements of education which might serve

to assist children in eventually existing as productive and self-sufficient adults in their natal communities was quite rightly perceived as the prime antagonists to the very future of the Native culture itself. Thus, the role of education changed from that of a cultural preservative and inter-generational bridge to that of a destroyer and self-intended barrier to the continued existence of the culture.

Whatever the inducements, it is naive to expect that children will succeed in an educational system which both they and their parents perceive to be inimical. A system which ignores or demeans ones' past naturally destroys a student's self and social image and attempts to impose an alien educational tradition and life style without a presentation of parallels or links between the two cultures is ethnocentric in the worse sense of the term. There is an obvious need, perceived by Native people and enlightened educators alike, to return learning to its proper place <u>within</u> the culture, and this can be accomplished only if the vital elements of choice, authority and control are returned where they belong: to the parents of the children to be educated.

Towards this end, "Native Studies" curricula is only a single element but, in combination with a variety of other necessary reforms (community school board development, community control of schools, etc.) it could be important.

Before discussing any specific program or programs titled "Native Studies", a basic definition of the concept must be determined. "Native Studies" could have a variety of meanings: the study <u>of</u> Natives and Native culture primarily

by non-Natives; a specialized course of study for Natives; a craft-oriented "shop" course; ethnohistory of a particular region; etc., etc.

It could refer to a course of study organized as part of a regular American school curriculum (9-10 Reading; 10-11 Math; 11-12 Native Studies), or it could be presented in a more traditional (from the Native point of view) "gestalt" manner, of which the school hours would constitute only a part; It could be extra-curricular or non-curricular. It could be taught by non-Native teachers whose expertise is derived from books, or by local village people whose knowledge comes from memories or everyday life. It could be presented as the most important body of learning, an equally important body of learning, or a relatively minor undertaking.

None of these options can be adequately or intelligently supported, however, until those in positions of power within the educational community adopt a clear and continuingly consistent attitude towards Native Studies which involves consideration of methods and particularly of long term goals. This does not mean of course that there must or could be a totally homogenous Native Studies program which would not deviate substantially from community ot community, but it does underline the absolute necessity of an attitude of respect, receptivity and cooperation on the part of educational administrators and teachers towards programs of study proposed by Native people in those communities.

It must be admitted from the outset by all concerned that the real "experts" on the needs and goals of Native Studies are none other than the Native people whose children attend the schools. Traditional educators must accredit this expertise and be willing to learn from the community what its needs are, not vice versa.

Native adults are fully cognizant of the educational demands of modern life and it would be ludicrous to suggest that they, in control of their own schools, would ignore the desirability or practical necessity of their children to learn English or Western science. As a matter of fact, none of these subjects would constitute basic innovations to the traditional formula of Native education. Most North American societies, functionally at least, were bi-lingual and all had well-developed theories of science and geometry. When new and efficient data was received by the culture it was naturally incorporated into its educational matrix.

Actually, with the exception of certain specific elements of Western literature and art (which might well be included in a course called White Studies) nothing in the existing educational rubric is alien to the normal channels of Native learning. Euro-American societies certainly have no monopoly on literature, science or philosophy, though the substantial Native American contributions to all three have been consistently underplayed or ignored. Essentially, the assumption that native societies were incapable of these aspects of learning prevailed.

What would be innovative, in a Native controlled school, is the realization that the serious study of indigenous history and culture is just as productive as the study of foreign societies. Such an approach would in no way incapacitate students for participation in American society. On the contrary, the importance of a strong ethnic identity has always been an asset rather than a liability. Indeed, it may be argued that a truly bi-cultural individual tends to be more adaptive.

This assumption underlies the very existence of Native American Studies on the College or University level. Native American Studies is not, or at least should not be, a trendy ethnic support aimed exclusively at Native American students though it must certainly aim towards fulfilling their academic aspirations and needs. As a discipline it defines an immensely complex historical, linguistic and cultural sphere, with no common denominator other than geography. Its parameters enclose forty millenia, millions of people, past and present, and diversities of language and modes of social organization which equal or surpass those of any other region of the world. If a rationale for the study of Native America needs to be presented, then "reasons" for an academic interest in the very fields of history, demography, science, religion, or anthropology are similarly called for.

Just as European and American educators and institutions have never suggested that the study of Western societies was pertinent to and meaningful for Caucasians only -- if they did, missionaries of every type would be out of their jobs -- so too

are investigations of the diverse peoples and societies of the Americas instructive and worthwhile for all peoples. The American continents gave birth to hundreds of unique cultures, each with its own answers to the basic human questions of "how" and "why". In a world searching for solutions to problems which threaten the very existence of the human species, it is a culpable act of cultural myopism to ignore their study.

And yet by and large ignored they have been. The average American's knowledge or understanding of the past of their resident continent is abysmal. Native American history and culture has been consistently maligned, muddled or murdered. No doubt, to the first Europeans who encountered it, the cultural diversity of Native America was both threatening and immobilizing. To those arriving from a relatively homogeneous milieu in which virtually everyone spoke an Indo-European language, practiced a Judeo-Christian religion and shared analgous concepts of law, sex roles and international affairs, Native America must indeed have seemed a "New World." From the Western European perspective it must have appeared to be a land where all accepted norms were either lacking or radically changed, and the very existence of people, encountered face-to-face, who viewed the world in a variety of differing, yet mutally tolerating ways must have traumatized any European to his cultural core. Pluralism itself was threatening: How could European society continue to believe itself to be the only right way to live, European religion the only right way to believe, if all these people got along very well without it?

Not surprisingly, to early Euro-Americans, cultural difference soon became synonymous with cultural or racial inferiority. Native American mores and norms were not simply viewed as variant, but as "savage" or "primitive" or "heathen."

This assumption of societal hierarchy and cultural relativism worked well with the plans some European nations had for the Americas. It would be hard to explain and rationalize both the unilateral "discovery" of peoples equally human (who "discovered" the Spanish or the English?) and to justify their brutal conquest in the name of God and morality. By defining Native Americans as immature "children of the forests" however, Europeans could be as benevolently acquisitive as they wished.

Since Native American Studies challenges that underlying definition it therefore conflicts with much of American and Canadian popular history. It is based on a respect for the peoples and cultures of indigenous America and treats them not as exotic examples, but as unique expressions of human development. Native American Studies disputes the <u>issue</u> of discovery with its concomitant implications and assumed privileges, and the <u>nobility</u> of American heroes whose claim to fame often rested upon the dispossession and slaughter of Native Americans. It must view the past three hundred years, not as the glorious construction of a great society, but as a period of plague, enslavement, oppression and struggle to avoid total genocide.

This is a picture of American history which traditionally has <u>not</u> found its way into the classroom. Consequently, most

students come to their first Native American Studies course with an attitude which can only be described as "Hollywood naive." Many are amazed to learn that there are more than a few hundred Native Americans "left." Most assume that all Native Americans look like the Indian head nickle and still practice "quaint" and exotic customs. And practically all non-Native students are flabberghasted to discover that there were hundreds, not one, "Indian" culture or language. To treat Native Americans as a contemporary population is often a shock and occasionally, for the cultural groupies, a disappointment. The typical student has a vision of Native Americans that is three parts Saturday matinee and one part ecology commercial and the "real thing" often has difficulty in competing.

As a result, the first great task of Native American Studies as a discipline is UN-learning. False assumptions must be exposed, negative and positive stereotypes must be isolated and dissppelled, and a tradition of primary school Thanksgiving pageants undone. It's a long, slow and often disheartening process, but it must be accomplished and the air cleared before any valid appreciation for the people and civiliztations of Native America can begin.

Native American Studies must above all not feed or reinforce the stereotypes. It must present its data with the same authority, respect and respectibility as that of any other discipline. It must constantly prove itself, maintain its integrity and break new ground. It must forever strive to present an emic point of view and avoid relative conclusions.

Introductory Native American Studies courses must therefore be quite basic, beginning not even at point "zero" but at "minus ten." Often this holds true for both non-Native and Native students, especially when the Native American student has grown up in an uban rather than a traditional community. At the integrated college or university it is dubious whether or not separate curricular plans for the Native and non-Native student are either practical or necessary. As enjoyable as an all-Indian class might be, its advantages are potentially offset by several factors. The Native American students who developed the model upon which Native American Studies at Dartmouth is based, for instance, realized that any move toward academic isolation would almost surely mean a short life span for the Program. A college or university is by nature disinclined to foot the bill for costly endeavors which are available to only a relatively few students.

Furthermore, no new discipline can hope to establish itself with credibility in the groves of academe while at the same time cutting itself off from the resources of all areas of the institution. Such a modus operendi yields few allies who will rally to the cause when the soft money runs out, and it tends to isolate Native American Studies faculty from productive interaction with their professional colleagues. Certainly an objective of any Native American Studies program is the desemination of information and ideas not just to students but to the populace at large, and this cannot be done effectively if the study of peoples and societies occurs only in Native American Studies courses. An effort must be mounted and

maintained to influence curricular development in the area of Native America in all academic arenas. Departments of literature, government, history, art, music, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, botany, etc. must be convinced to incorporate the wisdom and learning of Native America in their courses. Students who may have no interest per se in the specific offerings of Native American Studies must not be allowed to graduate without at least a glimmer of appreciation of the contributions of Native America to their fields. Such powerful and influential organizations as the Modern Language Associaton, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Historical Association must be educated to give proper weight to the accomplishments of Native American people, past and present, and to promote the incorporation of pertinent data at all levels of instruction.

This is a slow, laborious and uphill struggle, but if it is successful then perhaps a future generation of American school children will be spared an education either totally devoid of or misrepresenting the valuable and instructive experience of over 8,000 generations of Native Americans. Perhaps it will then be possible for them to see a demythologized American history and to at least honor the commitments and treaties their predecessors made with the native nations of this continent.

No one need worry that Native American Studies will disappear. The traditions of the past and the conditions of the

present have been preserved and handed down in Native communities without interruption despite all efforts to eradicate them. This will continue, with or without Native American Studies. Should our new academic descipline succeed, however, it may provide a scholarly base and meeting ground for Native people throughout the Americas, and, as a great innovation, it may afford the non-Native Americans of today the much-overdue opportunity to learn of and from the first and oldest inhabitants of this land.